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Rituals of Exclusion

Q: Mr. Foucault, it's been said that you've given us a new way of studying events. You've formulated an archeology of knowledge, the sciences of man, objectifying literary, or non-literary, documents of a period, and treating them as "archives." And you're also interested in current politics. How do you live out your science; how do you apply it to what's going on today? In other words, how do you uncover today's discourse? How do you perceive changes taking place at this moment?

MF: In the first place, I am not at all sure that I have invented a new method, as you were so kind to assert; what I am doing is not so different from many other contemporary endeavors, American, English, French, German. I claim no originality. It is true, though, that I have dealt especially with phenomena of the past: the system of exclusion and the confinement of the insane in European civilization from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, the establishment of medical science and practice at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the organization of sciences of man in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But I was interested in them—in fact, profoundly interested—because I saw in them ways of thinking and behaving that are still with us. I try to show, based upon their historical establishment and formation, those systems which are still ours today and within which we are trapped. It is a question of presenting a critique of our own time, based upon retrospective analyses.

Q: In terms of what's been happening in higher education around the world, do you see us, yourself, all of us, imprisoned in some kind of system?

MF: The form in which societies pass on knowledge is determined by a complex system: it hasn't yet been fully analyzed, but it seems to me that the system is being shattered; more under the influence of a revolutionary movement, in fact, than of mere theoretical or speculative criticism. There's a significant difference between the insane and the sick on the one hand, and students on the other, in this respect: in our society it is difficult for the insane who are confined or the sick who are hospitalized to make their own revolution; so we have to question these systems of exclusion of the sick and the insane from the outside, through a technique of critical demolition. The university system, however, can be put into question by the students themselves. At that point criticism coming from the outside, from theoreticians, historians or archivists, is no longer enough. And the students become their own archivists.

Q: Several years ago, a document appeared here called *The Student as Nigger*. Are there parallels aside from the master-slave relationship between the student as an excluded figure and the madman? And are there other "pariahs" defined and set by society in order to maintain its own rationality and cohesion?

MF: Your question is far-reaching and difficult to answer. At any rate, it concerns me greatly because it points essentially in the same direction as my work. Until now, it seems to me that historians of our own society, of our own civilization, have especially sought to get at the inner secret of our civilization, its spirit, the way it establishes its identity, the things it values. On the other hand, there has been much less study of what has been rejected from our civilization. It seemed to me interesting to try to understand our society and civilization in terms of its systems of exclusion, of rejection, of refusal, in terms of what it does not want, its limits, the way it is obliged to suppress a number of things, people, processes, what it must let fall into oblivion, its repression-suppression system. I know very well that many thinkers—though if only since Freud—have already tackled the problem. But I think there are exclusions other than the suppression of sexuality that have not been analyzed. There's the exclusion of the insane. There is, up to a certain point, the exclusion whereby we short-circuit those who are sick and reintegrate them in a sort of marginal circuit, the medical circuit. And there is the student: to a certain extent he is similarly caught inside a circuit which possesses a dual function. First, a function of exclusion. The student is put outside of society, on a campus. Furthermore, he is excluded while being transmitted a knowledge which is traditional in nature, obsolete, "academic" and not directly tied to the needs and problems of today. This exclusion is underscored by the organization around the student of social mechanisms which are fictitious, artificial and quasi-theatrical (hierarchical relationships, academic exercises, the "court" of examination, evaluation). Finally, the student is given a gamelike way of life; he is offered a kind of distraction, amusement, freedom which, again, has nothing to do with real life: it is this kind of artificial, theatrical society, a society of cardboard, that is being built around him; and thanks to this, young people from 18 to 25 are thus, as it were, neutralized by and for society, rendered safe, ineffective, socially and politically castrated. There is the first function of the university: to put students out of circulation. Its second function, however, is one of integration. Once a student has spent six or seven years of his life within this artificial society, he becomes "absorbable": society can consume him. Insidiously, he will have received the values of this society. He will have been given socially desirable models of behavior, so that this ritual of exclusion

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will finally take on the value of inclusion and recuperation or reabsorption. In this sense, the university is no doubt little different from those systems in so-called primitive societies in which the young men are kept outside the village during their adolescence, undergoing rituals of initiation which separate them and sever all contact between them and real, active society. At the end of the specified time, they can be entirely recuperated or reabsorbed.

Q: Could you then study the university the way you studied hospitals? Hasn't the system of the university changed somewhat? For example, are there not in recent history, and for various reasons, exclusions that were initiated by the excluded themselves?

MF: What I have just said is obviously only a very rough outline; it needs to be tightened up, for the mode of exclusion of students was certainly different in the 19th from that in the 20th century. In the nineteenth century, higher education was only for the children of the bourgeoisie, or that fringe of the petite-bourgeoisie which the higher echelon needed for its industry, its scientific development, its technical skills, etc. Universities now have a greater number of students from poorer groups of the petite-bourgeoisie. Thus we have, inside the university, explosive conflicts between, on the one hand, a lower-middle class which finds itself politically and socially more and more proletarianized by the very development of this higher bourgeoisie, for its development depends upon technology and science, that is, upon those contributions to it that are made by students and scientists sought from the ranks of the lower-middle class. This end result is that the upper-middle class, in its universities, recruits and enrolls, in order to turn them into scientists or technicians, people already undergoing a proletarian conversion and who consequently arrive at the university bearing a revolutionary potential: the enemy is within the gates.

So the status of the university becomes problematical. The upper-middle class must see to it that universities remain environments of exclusion where students are cut off from their real milieu, that is, from one which is undergoing a proletarian change. Concomitantly, universities must increasingly provide rituals of inclusion inside a system of capitalistic norms. Thus we have the strengthening of the old traditional university, with its character of both theatricality and initiation. However, as soon as they enter the system, students understand that they are being played with, that someone is trying to turn them against their true origins and surroundings. There follows a political awareness, and the revolutionary explosion.

Q: Aesthetics aside, do you see in what's happening in the university a parallel with Peter Weiss's play *Marat-Sade*[1]—there also is a director-producer seeking to put on a play acted out by mental patients who try to turn the play against the spectators?

MF: That's a very interesting reference. I believe that play tells what is happening now better than many theoretical essays. When Sade was an inmate at Charenton, he wanted to have plays acted by the inmates. In Sade's mind, his plays were to question his own confinement; in fact, what happened was that the inmates acting out his plays questioned not only the system of confinement, but the system of oppression, the values which Sade enforced upon them as he made them act out his plays. To a certain extent, Sade plays today's professor, the liberal professor who says to his students, "Well, why don't you just question all the bourgeois values they want to impose upon you," and the students, acting out this theater of academic liberalism, end up questioning the professor himself.

Q: This is just what I wanted to ask you about the relation between faculty and students: are not professors in a way themselves excluded? After all, professors and administrators live in the university community as well as students. Of course, one could say that administrators are only representatives of society, but in most cases, they are professors who have become administrators, and often temporarily. Are there differences between faculty and students?

MF: I don't know the American university system well enough to give you even the beginning of an answer. In France, a professor is a public official and therefore is a part of the state apparatus. Whatever personal opinions he may hold, the professor, as a public official, maintains the system of transmission of knowledge required by the government, that is, by the bourgeois class whose interests are represented by the government. In the United States, it is probably different because of the open market for professors. I don't know whether the American academic is more threatened, more exploited, or more ready to accept the values imposed upon him. The position of professor is almost untenable at the present, as is perhaps that of the lower-middle class: are not professors the most striking manifestation of this class which, in the nineteenth century, at least in France, managed to obtain from the upper-middle class delegate the right to exercise power? There existed what has been called a Republic of Professors and the political framework of the Third Republic was borrowed directly from the teaching profession, or from professions of the same type, physicians, lawyers, etc. Now that the Republic is functioning in a quite different framework, the lower-middle class in France is losing all control of the state apparatus. Therein lies its sense of misfortune, and its simultaneous wavering between the temptation to join the students and their revolutionary struggle, and the temptation to regain power, to seduce once more that upper-middle class which is no longer willing to accept it except as a technician.

Q: Before coming to Buffalo, you were teaching at Vincennes, an avant-garde university, which some consider in complete chaos, seeking to adapt itself to the process you just described. You were saying that the position of professor is becoming untenable—coming as you are from Vincennes to Buffalo, did you find yourself in a strange, exotic land?

MF: When I arrived in Buffalo, I thought that I still was in Vincennes; in spite of relatively superficial differences in behavior, dress, gestures and speech, it seemed to me that the same struggle was being waged in France and the United States. However, I believe that, as far as tactics and political strategy are concerned, American students are in a much different position from their French counterparts. French students, in fact, have to deal with a large, organized working class which, through its unions and political organizations, clamors its allegiance to Marxism: French workers are perhaps ready to listen to students and understand their struggle, but at the same time, French students have to fight the conservative influence of the Communist Party and the C.G.T.[2] The situation of American students appears very different: it seems to me that the working class in America relates less easily to the students' cause. It must be more difficult for an American student to militate together with workers. On the other hand, the advantage in America is that there are no great conservative forces like the Communist Party and the C.G.T. In prohibiting and prosecuting the Communist Party for so many years, I think that the American government worked, in a sense, for the revolutionary cause; it kept open the possibility of ties between the students and the workers. Obviously, there is also in America a specific stress point, the racial problem that we also have in France, but on a much smaller scale (one must not forget that there is in France a rather sizable group of African, Algerian or black workers, which constitute a numerically important subproletariat).

Q: Has there been an intensified chauvinism in France in the last few years, a growing refusal of anything that comes from the outside? It's true that America is a melting pot; does it make a difference?

MF: Well, it seems to me that, at least in intellectual circles, one does not encounter in America the unbearable chauvinism one finds in France. One must not forget that we are a small country caught between the two great models, the United States on the one hand and the Soviet Union on the other. We had to struggle for a long time against these two models. It was the Communist Party which suggested and imposed the Russian one, and the struggle against the Party's conservative influence brought a somewhat systematic refusal of the Soviet model; on the other hand, a certain liberal bourgeoisie tied up with American interests never stopped putting forward the American model, against which it was also necessary to struggle. At that point, I think, the mechanisms of chauvinism appeared inside the French Left. These are mechanisms that are not always conscious; they manifest themselves by a game of exclusion, of refusal and oversight. American literature, for instance, is very little read in France. One does not read American philosophy, history and criticism at all. American books are translated after an enormous delay. One must not allow the struggle against American economic influence and relations to affect relations with American intellectuals. We must have a selective nationalism. I believe that a small country like France is necessarily bound to be somewhat nationalistic in its politics

and economy if it wants to preserve some degree of independence; on the other hand, we must understand that a struggle which today is ideological, but will become some day openly revolutionary, is turning up in every corner of the world. Cultural chauvinism must be abandoned.

Q: This has been your first trip to America, your first teaching assignment in an American university. In relation to the cultural change which you just spoke about, how will these two months affect you?

MF: My problem is essentially the definition of the implicit systems in which we find ourselves prisoners; what I would like to grasp is the system of limits and exclusion which we practice without realizing it; I would like to make the cultural unconscious apparent. Therefore, the more I travel, the more I remove myself from my natural and habitual centers of gravity, the greater my chance of grasping the foundations I am obviously standing on. To that extent any trip—not, of course, in the sense of a sightseeing trip nor even a survey—any movement away from my original frame of reference, is fruitful. It is always good for me to change language and country. A simple example: in New York I was struck, as any foreigner would be, by the immediate contrast between the "good sections" and the poverty, even the misery, that surround them on the right and the left, North and South. I well know that one finds that same contrast in Europe, and that you too, when in Europe, are certainly shocked by the great misery in the poor sections of Paris, Hamburg or London, it doesn't matter where. Having lived in Europe for years, I had lost a sense of this contrast and had ended up believing that there had been a general rise in the standard of living of the whole population; I wasn't far from imagining that the proletariat was becoming middle class, that there were really no more poor people, that the social struggle, the struggle between classes, consequently, was coming to an end. Well, seeing New York, perceiving again suddenly this vivid contrast that exists everywhere but which was blotted out of my eyes by familiar forms of it, that was for me a kind of second revelation; the class struggle still exists, it exists more intensely.

Translated by J. K. Simon

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1 Peter Weiss, *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat, as performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton, under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*. (New York: Atheneum, 1966). [Ed.]

2 The C.G.T. (General Confederation of Workers) then was a powerful trade-union closely linked to the French Communist Party. Cf. A. Belden Fields, *Trotskyism and Maoism: Theory and Practice in France and the United States* (New York: Autonomedia, 1988). [Ed.]